



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

COLLINS ST, 5P.M.

Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.6 x 162.9 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

I used to stand in the doorway every night between 4.45 and 5.30 to watch the stream as it passed ...

As a matter of fact it used to strike me as most eerie, to be sketching within three feet of so many people, none of whom took the slightest notice. — 'John Brack on Brack', *CAE Art notes*, 1956.

John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* is considered to be both an iconic painting of peak-hour Melbourne and a social commentary on daily life in the 1950s. The painting depicts people emotionally closed down by the grind of daily work. The office workers are unaware of each other, despite their close proximity, and are oblivious of the artist, who may be drawing them. It is also a painting about the loss of individuality and a lack of social cohesion among the masses. This idea may have wider political implications to do with class and power relationships.

John Brack painted with sincerity from his own direct observations and experience of working in a city-based insurance company as a young man. To develop this painting, he referred to photographs of buildings in Collins Street and used his friend John Stephens as a model for the man wearing glasses closest to the left hand-side of the work.

Compare this photograph with the characters in John Brack's paintings. Observe the similarities and differences.

Henry Churchill Wingfield walking down Collins Street 1955.





Historical context – Postwar Melbourne

John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.* was painted at a time when there was still a lingering memory of the Depression and wartime austerity, yet there was more promise. It was a time of full employment, steady economic growth, home building soared and the suburbs around Melbourne spread. The population in the 1950s was primarily Anglo-Celtic in origin and Brack has painted them monochromatically, visually expressing this sameness. Today, Melbourne's population is more culturally diverse and the shopfronts are certainly more colourful.

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Describe the clothing of the people in *Collins St, 5p.m.*

What do people wear in a city street today? How has fashion changed?

Immigration

One of the reasons for the lack of cultural diversity in the city population was the White Australia Policy which was in place from 1901 to 1973. This policy restricted non-white people on racial grounds; it was based on fears that there would be problems with their assimilation and the threat of cheap labour. Policies were in place to maintain a way of life based on the British heritage of Australia as a former colony. In the 1950s immigration transformed Australia; however, immigrants came mainly from continental Europe and Britain.

Consider the Government documents available online from the National Archives of Australia for the 1950s. Search *White Australia Policy*. What do these documents say about the attitudes of policy-makers, policies and the officials who administered them?

Melbourne

In 1955 Melbourne experienced a growth in optimism and civic pride in the lead-up to the 1956 Olympic Games. This, however, was not the subject of Brack's work. He painted a rather more sombre image depicting Collins St at 5p.m.

In 1955 Melbourne's first skyscraper, ICI House, was approved. Modern architecture like the Melbourne Olympic Pool and Olympic Park were constructed and a civic clean-up included the demolition of Victorian cast-iron verandas from Melbourne shopfronts. The first television licences were granted in time to broadcast the Olympics. Those without new television sets often watched the 'friendly games' in department-store windows. Ironically, John Brack clearly painted a more old-fashioned Victorian cityscape, not the new architecturally modernist Melbourne. John Brack's work stands apart from this utopianism, with a more humanistic and socially critical agenda.



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Representations of the city

What else has changed in Australian cities since the 1950s? Use old newspapers, photographs and other primary sources to gather your evidence. Use a range of websites to search for Melbourne images from the 1950s. Visit websites such as Picture Australia at the National Library and Screen Australia. In particular, explore the State Library of Victoria and consider the images of Melbourne's Olympic buildings. Refer to www.slv.vic.gov.au/vicpamphlets/inter/594574.shtml

Australian identity

What does John Brack's work say about Australian identity?

Explore what you feel is an 'authentic' Australian image of the twenty-first century. Is it urban, suburban, outback or coastal? Is it possible to create a 'real' image of Australian identity? Why? Why not?

Visit your nearest city. Experience the streetscapes and compare painted and photographic representations of your city by artists over time.

If visiting Melbourne, follow the Golden Mile walking trail available from Melbourne visitors centre and observe the banks, old stock exchange, Block Arcade and other great Melbourne boom time buildings along Collins Street.

Compare John Brack's painting with the urban paintings of Charles Conder and Tom Roberts.